

# Impact of the Zimbabwean language policy on the Shona language and culture

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## Abstract

The paper explores how the Zimbabwean language policy's promotion of the English language to the official language status at the expense of the local languages has impacted on the Shona language and culture. The paper reports on results of a qualitative research that employed interview and observation as the two data collection methods. The sample for the information was drawn from the Shona speakers in Masvingo province and analysis as well as presentation was done qualitatively. It emerged that the Shona language and culture are suffering immensely as a result of the status accorded to English in the nation. For instance, some parents have opted for speaking with their children in English in order to make them acquire it as their mother tongue at the same time sending them to schools where English is the sole medium of instruction and no teaching of a local language taking place. Some of the parents are encouraging their children to fully adopt the English culture as this would enhance their mastery of the language since language is culturally transmitted. The diglossic situation that saw Shona as a Low variety and English as the High variety is also heavily impacting Shona structurally. It has been concluded that the 1980 independence was only a political rather than a sociolinguistic one. The research recommends an urgent review of the current language policy in order to save the endangered indigenous languages and cultures.

**Key Terms:** language policy, Shona language, Shona culture

## 1. Introduction and Orientation

Shohamy (2006) describes language policy as what a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used to cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages. It, thus, serves as the determinant of the ultimate contribution of each language (together with the culture associated with it) to a nation's well-being. A nation may opt for an exoglossic language policy that emphasises the promotion of exotic languages, which is the case with almost every developing country, or an endoglossic policy, which is the case with almost all developed countries.

According to the Financial Gazette of 15 September 2015, the old constitution only recognised English, Ndebele and Shona as the official languages of Zimbabwe. This is a policy that was put in place by the former colonisers and it made the three languages appear placed at the same level in the country. However, in actual fact, as evident in the education acts of 1987 and 2006, English enjoyed the highest status in the country. Shona and Ndebele (the local languages involved) were and are still acting as national languages rather than real official languages. They enjoy a position well below that of English. The policy came with the former colonisers who also tried all they could to turn the locals against their cultures and traditions. The 2013 constitution maintained a similar stance, though for fear of raising eyebrows, just indicated that all 16 languages in the country are officially recognised (Financial Gazette, September 15, 2015).

Thus, the colonial era in Zimbabwe left a language policy that has been maintained to this day, that is, 35 years after independence. This had the goal of enhancing linguistic imperialism by elevating English to the official language status and Shona together with Ndebele being demoted to National language status. The rest of the local languages were relegated to the minority language status. At school, all subjects, except the local languages are conducted in English though at advanced and university levels of education, English is the medium of instruction. Therefore, the policy has made English 'the language' in Zimbabwe.

English, though it is taught up to university level just like Shona and Ndebele, it is the language that guarantees one access to scarce resources both nationally and internationally. In other words, a failure in English would mean no access to tertiary education and it renders one unemployable for white collar jobs. In addition to that, job and education interviews are conducted in English which ensures that only fluent speakers succeed. In all these cases, all local languages are of no help. Having a pass in them does not cover up for a failure in English. This has made all the local languages, together with their cultures, appear useless in the country. This is obvious since language is the tool for tapping knowledge from a culture and this points to a close relationship between language and culture that most scholars rightly describe as inseparable ([www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org)).

Culture, in simple terms, is the knowledge bank of a community's norms, values and beliefs. Hence Malinowski's assertion that culture is an integral whole of three components namely artifacts, including means and mode of production; organizations, including social, economic and political organizations; and the ethics and values ([www.anthrobase.com/Browse/Cit/M/bronislaw\\_k\\_malinowski.htm](http://www.anthrobase.com/Browse/Cit/M/bronislaw_k_malinowski.htm)). According to him, a person's value

orientation is not innate, but is rather acquired during childhood, and is passed from one generation to the next through language. Thus, the core ethical values of a nation's culture are transmitted from generation to generation through the interactions of children with their parents and surrounding people (Kangira and Mudzingwa, 2003).

As a result, it is important to note that the death of a language means the disappearance of the culture it carries. This will mean loss of the traditional, values, wisdom and knowledge housed in that language. It is also important to note that some languages are still alive but their insignificance in as far as the national policy is concerned makes no one interested in acquiring and using them together with the cultures and traditions they carry (Spolsky, 2012). With the passage of time, the departure of the elderly speakers would also mean the permanent death of those languages, their cultures and traditions.

Crystal (2000) notes that language death is a process that affects speech communities where the level of linguistic competence that speakers possess of a given language variety is decreased, eventually resulting in no native or fluent speakers of the variety. This supports Fishman's (1991) earlier observation that except in cases of linguicide, languages do not suddenly become extinct but they rather become moribund as the community of speakers gradually shifts to using other languages. As speakers shift, there are discernible, if subtle, changes in language behaviour. These changes in behaviour lead to a change of linguistic vitality in the community and subsequently language death (Landweer, 2011). As a result, Crystal (2000) suggests six key themes in language revitalization namely increasing the prestige, wealth, and power of language speakers; giving the language a strong presence in the education system; giving the language a written form and encouraging literacy; and access to electronic technology (the latter being more of a "possibility" than a reality in most cases). He also argues for a stronger emphasis on descriptive linguistics and fieldwork, and stresses the need to build a rounded "revitalization team", involving a broad range of community leaders, teachers, and other specialists as well as linguists.

It is upon such a background that this study comes in to assess the impact of the Zimbabwean language policy on the Shona language.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Studies on language death indicate that people are usually eager to acquire and use languages that have societal value. Considering the Zimbabwean language policy, it is likely that the well-being of local languages and cultures are being threatened by the prominence of English. The paper, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent to which the English language has made the Shona language and culture lose their value and status in our communities.

## **3. Justification of the Study**

Language is central to every person. In the Holy Bible, God stopped the tower of Babel from going to greater heights by disturbing the builders' ability to communicate. Studies in evolution have it that humans have to stand on two legs as well as develop well ahead of other animals due to the efficiency of their communication system. This makes it vital for such studies that guard against deaths of endangered languages. Furthermore, one's first language is also the language of his/ her initial socialisation. This is the language in which the world is defined and thought processes take place. Ensuring longevity of the Shona language would thus benefit about 75% of the Zimbabwean population who are first language speakers.

Spolsky (2012) has observed that more than half of the 6000 languages currently spoken in the world are estimated to be in danger of disappearing during the 21st century. Spolsky further notes that many factors affect the existence and usage of any given human language, including the size of the native speaking population, its use in formal communication, the geographical dispersion and the socio-economic weight of its speakers. This makes such studies long overdue as they may reassert the use of the Shona language and in turn ensure its extended life.

Studies on the history of Chinese and Japanese development indicate the centrality of local languages and cultures in development ([www.worldpoliticsreview.com](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com)). They translated everything into local languages conducting education in them which ensured harmony between the environment around and the educational concepts. This in turn ensured a proper understanding that enhanced creativity with learned concepts. Such scenarios make indigenous languages so critical and thus everyone's task to save and fight for their promotion.

## **4. Research Objectives**

Some of the leading objectives of the study are to:

- Find out the effect of the status of English on the Shona language
- Find out effect of the status of English on Shona culture
- Establish the impact of the policy on Shona first language speakers' attitudes towards the language and culture

## 5. Research Questions

The questions guiding the study are:

- How has the status of English affected the Shona language?
- How has the status of English affected the shona culture?
- In what ways has the Zimbabwean language policy impacted on the attitudes of Shona first language speakers towards their language and culture?

## 6. Research Methodology

The study has adopted a qualitative research paradigm. Masvingo province was taken as the case study and data was gathered through interviews and observations of purposively sampled people. Informants were informed on the focus of the study and had the right to opt out of the research at any moment. Views were collected and analysed qualitatively in the light of the research questions guiding the research.

## 7. Findings

It came out that Shona people have developed a negative attitude towards their first language. They are eager to develop their ability to communicate in English language to greater heights as it is the only avenue to scarce resources. Some described the language as useless since it is of no apparent value. It does not give a person job opportunities so there is no reason for making children acquire and let alone study it. Some demonstrated that they have opted to make their children acquire the useful language (English) as their mother tongue as this will avoid Shona interference when they learn the various courses in English at school. They thus consider Shona to be a barrier to children's mastery of a language that is useful in their entire life. To facilitate that, some indicated that they make sure no one (even the maid) use Shona in the presence of their children. This is a typical way of facilitating language death as the attitude will result in reduced acquirers of the language and subsequently the language dies with the old generation.

One university lecturer stressed the importance of a child being instructed in the first language in all subjects as this will ensure the best cognitive development. Due to this, he emphasised the importance of making the child acquire English at home then proceed to schools where no local language is taught and children interact only in English as this promotes a smooth transition from home to school environment. A closer analysis indicates that this has given rise to Black English people in Zimbabwe. These are western in their language as well as their behaviour and only Zimbabwean in their skin pigmentation and origin.

It also emerged that parents have become very proud of children who excel in English than Shona. They even associate that with a potential brighter future. As a result most parents sent their children for extra English lessons whereas no one consider extra Shona lessons inspite of the rising number of students failing Ordinary level Shona. Secondary school Shona language teachers have attributed this rise in failure rate to the negative attitude that students have towards the subject. They argued that this has been influenced by both parents and the status of the language in the country. The Shona teachers described their task as the most difficult since they would have to make students who have a negative attitude and not taking the subject seriously pass in order to ensure the achievement of their pass rate demanded by the employer.

To further explain the high Shona failure rate, one college lecturer indicated that the lower status of the language has created a diglossic situation with English as the High variety and Shona as the Low variety. This has influenced a lot of borrowing that is apparently corrupting phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic processes of the Shona language permanently. For instance, the honorific Shona affix 'va-' is often substituted with 'a-' following the lack of honorific affixes in English. He foresees a situation whereby the language would soon completely lose some of the basic features that used to make it fit into the Bantu family of languages. Hence the status is slowly corrupting the internal composition of the language.

One university lecturer described the situation as pathetic citing their own scenario as an example. He indicated that whilst the university's niche is that of cultural heritage, they are supposed to teach courses on local music in English. He argued that it is very difficult to bring one to a complete appreciation of the music and dances of the Shona people. This demonstrates how much the policy has blinded the nation. They cannot believe in their indigenous languages' potential in spite of their apparent zeal to protect both the language and the culture.

Some ordinary Shona speakers indicated that the issue is serious as even laymen feel the national importance of English as well as the uselessness of Shona. One old man indicated that in some discussions, especially at beer parties, peers would never consider your point important unless you code mix your Shona with some English bits. They would code mix to impress the researcher as well during the interview session in spite of their old age demonstrating that it has become typical of them.

A close analysis indicated that the Shona culture is not being spared by the development. Both the old and young generation demonstrated an increased appreciation of English ways of living like dress codes and food in place of Shona traditional ones. Where the traditional foods are consumed, it emerged that they are prepared using the western methods. In line with Kangira and Mudzingwa's (2003) observation, some parents indicated

that exposing children to the English culture would promote their learning of the language as fluency is easily attained when the language is culturally transmitted. One old man even argued that this is no longer time for Shona traditional foods. This demonstrates that even the elderly who used to act as the custodians of the indigenous languages and cultures have been heavily affected leaving no one in guard.

It also came out that some typical Shona traditional concepts like Shona norms and values, the extended family and religious beliefs are not being spared in the process. For instance, the traditional medicines that used to assist the society are now either considered invalid or evil and the knowledge is vanishing with the old generation as no young one is prepared to acquire it. Sacred places are also no longer respected which has destroyed their sacredness. One conservative old lady indicated that there are no more traditional practices like rain making ceremonies which has seen more droughts in our country.

## 8. Conclusion

These findings affirm the belief that language and culture are inseparable. Language is culturally transmitted which implies that people acquire language as a component of the culture they learn. Culture is also imparted through language which makes the promotion of one ensure promotion of the other and vice versa. The research findings demonstrate that the Zimbabwean language policy is fuelling Shona linguistic and cultural death. The results affirm that the 1980 independence was only a political one not a sociolinguistic one since instead of the people recovering from the effects of former coloniser's cultural and linguistic imperialism, they are even taking the imperialism further. Thus the coloniser was clever enough when he left the structures in place to take the reign forward. The policy that has been adopted has turned almost everyone into a tool for destroying the local languages and cultures.

## 9. Recommendations

The research recommends that:

- Zimbabwean indigenous languages and cultures be considered endangered by the status of English;
- whilst English is a necessity for the country's well-being in the light of globalisation, treating it as the only language will ultimately kill indigenous languages and cultures;
- in line with Crystal's (2000) recommendations, there is need for the country to understand the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity which will see them patriotically fighting for these intangible heritages; and
- Shona, like all other indigenous languages, falls under the group of endangered languages (as characterised by Landweer, 2011) and this warrants the revision of the national language policy.

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